

The following is an excerpt from a three-volume work in progress in which Mr. Montgomery attempts, in his words, "a sort of Voegelinean study of the effects of intellectual currents since the Renaissance on what Flannery O'Connor speaks of as the 'popular spirit of each succeeding age.'" The work is to be titled Homage to Flannery O'Connor.

Some Reflections on Miss O'Connor and the Dixie Limited

Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down.

—Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction"

Marion Montgomery

NOT even the concrete poet can bring himself to that final word, "The rest is silence," for he is unable to refrain from at least attaching his name to his silent pattern. It is a rare poet indeed, such as Eliot finally becomes and Flannery O'Connor was almost from the beginning, who can see a possible way out of the poet's dilemma, speaking the unspeakable, through those words in John, "It is finished." Miss O'Connor believes firmly, as she says, that those words connect with transcendent mystery in a being whose sacrifice is unlike that of Oedipus at Colonus. In poets like Eliot and O'Connor there is firm commitment to those romantic inclinations that have become a cliché in the definitions of romanticism: the romantic reveals himself by looking to the past, for instance, manifesting that fascination with the Middle Ages one finds so generally in early nineteenth-century letters. But both Eliot and O'Connor move, not simply back to the Middle Ages,

but all the way back to Bethlehem, and they once more actively affirm a confidence in the intersection of time by the transcendent, the Incarnation, which rescues in their confidence the individual soul from both the trap of fallen nature and the treachery of language. And they believe that they gain a confidence in and authority over language thereby.

There are many parallels in the concerns of O'Connor and Eliot which the local materials of her fiction obscure. Her work dramatizes the intellectual dilemma Eliot wrestles in his poetry. As there is a dramatic tension between her Misfit's free action and his manners, so too there is a conflict between the writer's struggle for a freed mind or spirit and the imprisoning of the mind by the formalities of language such as Eliot's intellectual history reveals. Let us recall our fascination with that Misfit poet, Rimbaud, who at last embraces silence, and behind Rimbaud there is the puzzling darkness in Poe and Baudelaire. We recognize in them the dangers and risks that somehow stir our admiration, if not emulation. And we remember that these pilgrims of the spirit were of more than poetic interest to Eliot. In her own concern with such grotesque inclinations of the modern world, Miss O'Connor comments, in "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," that

There is something in us, as story-tellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored. The reader of today looks for that motion, and rightly so, but what he has forgotten is the cost of it. His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether and so he has forgotten the price of restoration. . . . He wants to be transported, instantly, either to a mock damnation or a mock innocence.

Or, one might suggest, he may choose the Risk Vicarious. If the full expression of oneself (the popular Shibboleth of our age) requires of one a price so drastic as Rimbaud's exile in the desert or Baudelaire's descent into *Flowers of Evil* or Eliot's own desperate moment on the beach where he can connect nothing with nothing, those daring souls have left the strewn fragments of their risk for a reader's delectation. The fullness of being which they pursue lies somehow, it seems, beyond the possibilities of language, even for such consummate users of language. Yet one must go through language toward it, to the point where he emerges to say, if fortunate in his struggle, that words do not mean what they seemed to mean, that the poems have become something other than what they were. The cost to an Eliot is in his poetry up through "Ash-Wednesday." The relaxation in his subsequent poetry, after a considerable expense of mind and expansion of spirit, is part of the reason some readers find the *Quartets* an anticlimax. Nevertheless, one notices in that later poetry a more deliberate address to words themselves, a conjuring of them and a respect for them, though not an absolute commitment to them. For Eliot has come to accept the impossibility of a full expression of being through the poet's powers alone. Indeed, the full expression of unaided being is a contradiction, not a paradox, as one learns after all passion is spent.

We may dwell yet a moment upon this haunting problem, since it is so general, to see Miss O'Connor more clearly in the context of her age. We notice more often than not a sort of desperation in the artist's desire for absolute freedom as it is frustrated by the inevitable dictates of form. It is a leading characteristic of twentieth-century literature. James Joyce, near the end of his life, at one moment despairs over whether *Finnegan's Wake* is simply a product of his fancy rather than of his

imagination, whether he may not in the end have turned aside from a direct engagement in the struggle of mind with words, as Dante's pilgrim is tempted to do in that initial attempt to avoid hell by climbing the mountain toward the sun and thus escape the necessary agony of mind and spirit by transportation to a mock innocence. Joyce worries those terms, *Fancy* and *Imagination*, reflecting upon Coleridge's use of them. Nor should we forget that Coleridge is very much concerned to anchor the Imagination in that transcendent, the great I AM. At the end of Ezra Pound's life, at the end of his *Cantos*, we find Pound struggling with this Joycean concern, wondering whether indeed Eliot was right in the journey he took and whether the *Cantos* hang together in any organic way. (One of the current critical problems with Pound is the attempt to reconcile his final wavering to his earlier resolute position so that an organic development in his poetry may be demonstrated. The alternative is either to grant some validity to Pound's late recantation or to explain it away as a maundering out of dementia praecox. The difficulty of the latter course is the persuasiveness of the later poetry.) One finds in a poet so self-assured as Wallace Stevens evidence of desperation on behalf of the unaided sensibility, an assertion of the freed powers of the imagination. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," there is to my mind an excessive assertion of the power of individual imagination as preeminent authority over, not simply reason, but reality as well, the excessiveness speaking a disquiet.

All these—Joyce, Stevens, Pound (one could extend the list)—are writing from a state of mind which has come to recognize a separation of grace and nature, which separation both Eliot eventually and O'Connor from the beginning deny. When Miss O'Connor says, in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," that "as grace

and nature have been separated, so imagination and reason have been separated, and this always means an end to art," we need to make a distinction concerning the separation as "an end to art." Obviously, one does not say by that remark that Joyce, Stevens, Pound are not artists of a very high order of accomplishment. Yet we can but notice how much our critical concern has turned to the question of the decline of poetry and fiction since these poets. It is as if they carried us to the end of art's possibilities in dramatizing the agony of that separation of grace and nature.

The question arises, in relation to the Southern Renaissance, of whether Faulkner isn't the culmination of that movement and subsequent Southern writing a long, withdrawing roar, perhaps even a whimper. That is a position, for instance, which Professor Walter Sullivan advances. In explaining the relatively late appearance of Flannery O'Connor, Professor Sullivan has suggested that Milledgeville is sufficiently out of the modern wash that the pre-World War II world lingered there somewhat later. There is unquestionably a falling off in some Southern writing which is in the national public eye. The work of Jesse Hill Ford comes to mind, and it suggests an end to the Southern Renaissance when Ford's work is measured against that of Faulkner and O'Connor. Yet perhaps in this very concern for the separation of grace from nature, which Miss O'Connor repeatedly voices, we may discover not only some explanation for the apparent decline but also a signal of a direction of recovery. Once more, however, I should like to emphasize that "Southern literature" as we mean it here in relation to Faulkner and the Southern Fugitive Agrarian movement is not a matter of geography or of the calendar. With that understanding in mind, we may see not only a relation of Miss O'Connor

to Faulkner, but also a crucial difference between them.

The question of the separation of grace from nature, followed by the separation of imagination and reason, makes a profitable entry into that poet of the human spirit, Faulkner. One recalls particularly the lesson of Ike McCaslin as it may be learned from "The Bear" and from that episode as it is incorporated in *Go Down, Moses* and complemented by other stories in the book. And to Ike McCaslin, we must add other characters out of Faulkner who are less mystically or intellectually inclined whom Faulkner praises and celebrates. Faulkner celebrates a certain quality in these characters that concerns us here, a quality readily recognized by allusion, so that we shall not delay our theme by an extensive excursion into Faulkner. Let us suggest, then, that Ike holds our admiration, and Faulkner's, not because he triumphs, for in the end, as we see in "Delta Autumn," his great struggle to be reconciled to existence fades sadly in the light of modernism's triumph. Nevertheless, Ike attempts a reconciliation of grace and nature, under the tutelage of that mystic of the immanent, Sam Fathers.

Later we shall speak of Faulkner's kinship to Hawthorne, particularly relating "The Custom House" to Ike's disturbed fascination with the plantation ledgers as revealing a common interest in Faulkner and Hawthorne with the problem of history. In that later argument, we shall elaborate upon the separation, the dissociation of man and nature as it may be discovered in Lockean and pre-Lockean philosophical intrusions upon man's relation to his world. Here we need only recall John Keats's melancholy encounter with that separation, particularly in his odes, so that we may come at once to Ike's wiser cousin in *Go Down, Moses*. McCaslin speaks with young Ike about the relation of

pursuit to victory in man's wrestling with the mystery of being, and he reads to the boy from Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." It is the pursuit that sustains one against death; victory is a kind of defeat. The bear is sadly reduced from its mysterious greatness when it lies dead at one's feet. In those lines from the ode, McCaslin says to Ike, Keats is talking about truth, not "a girl," as the young Ike would have it. He talks about truth, though "He had to talk about something" like a girl or music or trees in order to do so. (Faulkner gives Ike's cousin an authority through *name*: he is McCaslin, the bearer of the family name, but Ike McCaslin is *Ike*.) Now the course Ike pursues up to his death, in spite of the piety which elicits our admiration, involves a presumption as well, the presumption that he is himself an agent of grace, as if in him, nature and man are to be reconciled. His responsibility to the world is exercised in giving up the world, in refusing to hold property. But his cousin sees a higher responsibility, that of a stewardship which requires actions, even violations, if order is to be maintained against an encroaching chaos. Chaos nevertheless intrudes upon the dream of the Wilderness as Eden, that New England Puritan element of thought which is not absent from Faulkner's world and thought, though he opposes it. The logging train comes, the instrument of the more remote men who exploit the wilderness, who see the wilderness as so many board feet. McCaslin is in his position somewhere between Ike and such men and is perpetually defeated, though perpetually resolute as well. For that reason McCaslin embodies Faulknerian virtues more firmly than Ike.

Ike is very much the Count Tolstoy in this matter, surrendering the world in a personal sacrifice he would believe a general sacrifice, an expiation on mankind's behalf. In one sense it is a noble sacrifice which Faulkner

so admires, but a presumptuousness is in it nevertheless. One might suggest Ike as a passive Ivan Karamazov. In the light of his understanding of the violations of the world, he requires a secular Christ—himself—as an answer to the violations and as a counter to the intruding chaos that destroys the wilderness Eden forever. McCaslin, somewhere in that middle distance between the antagonists of the world such as Ike and the ruthless materialist, sees both extremes, and speaks for “Courage and honor and pride, and pity and love of justice and of liberty. They all touch the heart, and what the heart holds to becomes truth, as far as we know truth.” But what one recognizes here is that, though Faulkner sees McCaslin as wiser and sounder than Ike, McCaslin is still trapped within an intramundane world. If Ike’s heresy is passive sacrifice, McCaslin’s is an active one, his presumption lying in the assumption that his actions, though not adequate to the necessities of the world, are the best service of man to the world. Between these two images of the hero, McCaslin and Ike, Faulkner’s world is suspended. Miss O’Connor pays her tribute to Faulkner as artist when, pressed about her relationship to Faulkner, she says, “Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down.”* But she nevertheless sees a considerable distance between her ultimate vision and the one Faulkner holds.

*Terry Eastland gives an account of Willie Morris’s visit to Greensboro, North Carolina, from Boston to speak as a Southern writer. (“South Toward Home,” *National Review*, May 28, 1976, 563-62). He quotes an exchange in a question-answer session: “How do you compare yourself with William Faulkner?” “You get off the tracks when the Dixie Special comes through.” The distance in literary effectiveness between Morris’s echo and Miss O’Connor’s words (assuming accurate report by Eastland) is symptomatic of the decline in Southern writing that concerns Professor Sullivan. That is, Morris’s response is an abstraction of Miss O’Connor’s. With the mule and wagon gone the concrete world turns hazy motion.

As for Faulkner's vision, it would seem to hold McCaslin's resolution as the highest. It is resolution in the face of overwhelming, incomprehensible forces, expressed quite often with wry humor or Gargantuan comedy. That is the backbone in Faulkner's world, upon which the flesh of particular characters and events hangs. It is more than courage, as Bayard Sartoris discovers in *The Unvanquished*. It is an aspect in a people which has been created by the resolution of the will and which elevates the human heart to the highest position in nature, toward which elevated heart the world turns with a piety admirable but secular in its worship. History, it seems, makes that quality of the will an acquired characteristic. It is in a people's character as deep as the blood. It is the quality with which they face the world, even as they are defeated. Thus Faulkner celebrates a people stubbornly prevailing in the wreckage of their past and present and impending future. It is the invaluable experience of a perpetual Reconstruction which will make them—in that favorite Faulkner word—prevail, whether the next war goes one way or another. What one sees, perhaps, is a pagan stubbornness, revealed as the common attribute in Faulkner's community. It accounts for those actions Faulkner celebrates, whereby one goes on about his business, whatever the circumstance.

Eliot has said, of this common necessity to prevail, though with a sense of that necessity related to the transcendent world,

. . . if blood of the Martyrs is to flow on the steps
 We must first build the steps;
 And if the Temple is to be cast down
 We must first build the Temple.

There is no temple (in Eliot's sense) in Faulkner, though there are church roofs to be repaired. And Faulkner's

martyrs are men like Sutpen and Joe Christmas, Ike and Lena and Nancy. The lord of their varied devotion is endurance itself, an endurance bespeaking the human heart. The wisdom in the blood that makes them get on about their business is a wisdom that elevated humanity to the peak of immanence. When Miss O'Connor's Tarwater speaks so sharply about minding his own "bidnis," of getting on about his "bidnis," he is struggling to remain a citizen of Faulkner's world, but it is a world which is finally insufficient to Miss O'Connor, as Tarwater's progress reveals. Faulkner's hero is closer in his virtues to the Old Testament Job than to Christ. In characterizing a dirt farmer turned schoolmaster and lawyer in *The Hamlet*, Faulkner says:

His was that quality lacking which no man can ever be completely brave or completely craven: the ability to see both sides of the crisis and visualize himself as already vanquished—itself inherent with its own failure and disaster.

I am not arguing that Miss O'Connor rejects Faulkner's vision. She sees rather that in his vision lies a ground out of which spiritual discovery and recovery may be drawn. For, as Faulkner says, man lacking the quality to face inevitable defeat lacks the capacity to be either completely brave or craven. With that quality, there exists the possibility of a "good under construction," in Miss O'Connor's phrase. It is possible to move from that state in which one has "the patience of Job" to that level of patience for which Eliot prays in "Ash-Wednesday" when he says "Teach us to care and not to care." In that new state, the world begins to appear in a different dimension altogether and one accepts a different truth about the world: if the blood of martyrs is to flow, the steps must be built upon which it may flow. Sutpen's Hundred is capable of

being seen as changed in this new vision, and McCaslin's plantation as well, their time-bound history notwithstanding. For the guilt which the modern world holds explicable only in terms of a binding history—the most general instance the imputed general Southern guilt of historical slavery—is deeper than such history can explain. History is incapable of washing the blood from the steps, history in this instance being our own actions spent in expiating the past, but actions separated from grace. That, again, is the heretical supposition in *Ike McCaslin*, its more violent counterpart in Sutpen, who would redeem the history of his own youth by establishing his Hundred. Sutpen bequeaths an error of the mind that confuses the haunting guilt in the blood with history as its agent. But the “evil is the efficient cause of a bad action,” Saint Augustine says, not history. Guilt is in response to a present possibility, but not a possibility of action in which man himself is sufficient. The sacrifice of blood necessary to redeem time—the present moment of the will, and so in consequence time present, past and future—is not that natural blood of and in time, but the Blood given incommensurately to the inclusive conditions of time and place through the mystery of the Incarnation. In the light of this distinction, one sees *Wise Blood* not as Faulknerian, but as reaching beyond Faulkner's world, though it shares in details of the local, regional, historical.

Miss O'Connor's fiction is a corrective to the Manichean confusions that separate heart and head, body and mind, idea and matter. Those separations, as she understood acutely, are out of that destructive separation of grace and nature. Whatever else may be said of her fiction in relation to Faulkner's, hers reflects a deliberate concern for the intellectual confusions of the modern world spawned by the Enlightenment. For her, it is the eighteenth century which makes possible

our Raybers and Haze Motes, not the nineteenth century. We shall have to look more closely at this conclusion to see more clearly the relation of her fiction to Faulkner's.



I have a query concerning Flannery O'Connor's "Greenleaf." In the beginning of the story (*The Collected Stories*, p. 316), Mrs. May thinks: "somebody had been hurt on the place and would sue her for everything she had. *She had no insurance*" (italics supplied). Towards the end of the story, however, when she again is worried over the possibility of an injury on her property, we are told: "Then she dropped it, for Mr. Greenleaf had a gun with him and *she had insurance*" (p. 333, italics supplied). My question is, what purpose did O'Connor have in allowing this discrepancy?

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Editor's Note: The Flannery O'Connor Collection at Georgia College contains no draft of this story. We are thus unable to offer this reader any assistance.